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The Making of a Munshi

MUZAFFAR ALAM & SANJAY SUBRAHMANYAM

The difficult transition between the information and knowledge regimes of the precolonial and colonial political systems of South Asia was largely, though not exclusively, mediated by scribes, writers, statesmen, and accountants possessing a grasp of the chief language of power in that time, namely Persian. More than any vernacular language or Sanskrit, it was in Persian that the officials of the English East India Company conducted its early rule, administration, and even diplomacy in the years around the seizure of the revenues of Bengal in the mid-eighteenth century. Hence they naturally had to come to terms with the social group that was regarded as most proficient in this regard.¹ To be sure, the Mughal aristocracy and its regional offshoots provided them with certain models of etiquette and statecraft, and various “Mirror of Princes” texts attracted the attention of Company officials. But the pragmatic realities of political economy that had to be dealt with could not be comprehended within the *adab* of the aristocrat, and the representatives of Company Bahadur were, in any event, scarcely qualified themselves to claim such an unambiguous status. The real interlocutor for the Company official thus was the *munshi*, who was mediator and spokesman (*naki*), but also a key personage who could both read and draft materials in Persian, and who had a grasp over the realities of politics that men such as Warren Hastings, Antoine Polier, and Claude Martin found altogether indispensable.²

Though the term *munshi* is recognizable even today, it has shifted semantically over the years. Aficionados of Hindi films since the 1960s will recognize the character of the *munshi* as the accountant and henchman of the cruel and grasping *zamindar*, greasily rubbing his hands and usually unable to protest the immoral demands of his master.³ Specialists on colonial surveying operations in the Himalayas and Central Asia will recall that some of those sent out on such ventures were already called “pundits” and “moonshees” in the mid-nineteenth century.⁴ But the latter set of meanings is not our concern in this brief essay. Rather, we shall look at how, in

the high Mughal period, one became a *munshi*, what attributes were principally called for, and what the chief educational demands were. The sources with which we approach this problem fall broadly into two categories. Relatively rare are the first-person accounts or autobiographical narratives that will be our principal concern here. More common are normative texts, corresponding to the “Mirror of Princes” type, but which we may term the “Mirror for Scribes.” Thus, in the reign of Aurangzeb, just as Mirza Khan could pen the *Tuhfat al-Hind* (Gift of India), in which he set out the key elements in the education of a well-brought-up Mughal prince,⁵ others wrote works such as the *Nigarnamah-i Munshi* (Munshi’s Letterbook), which were primarily concerned with how a *munshi* was to be properly trained, and which technical branches of knowledge he ought rightfully to claim a mastery of.⁶ Earlier still, from the reign of Jahangir (r. 1605–28), we have a classic text entitled *Insba’-i Harkaran*, the author of which, Harkaran Das Kambuh of Multan, claimed to have served with his family as scribes in the high Mughal administration. The significance of this text was such that the East India Company produced an edition and translation of it in the late eighteenth century, so that it could serve as a model text for its own early administrators when they dealt with the knotty problems of inherited Mughal administrative practice and terminology.⁷ The *munshi* was thus the equivalent in the Mughal domains of the south Indian *karanams*, whose careers and worldview have recently been the object of an extensive treatment.⁸

Since such materials fell into a branch of knowledge that was regarded as secular, in the sense of being distinctly this-worldly and largely devoid of religious or theological connotations, we are not entirely surprised to find that many of their authors, including Harkaran himself, were Hindus, usually Khattris, Kayasthas, or Brahmans. It has long been recognized that over the centuries of Muslim rule in northern India, the frontiers of Persian came to extend far beyond the narrow circle of the emperor, the princes, and high nobles.⁹ Akbar

was the first of the Indo-Islamic kings of northern India formally to declare Persian the language of administration at all levels, which had not been the case under the Afghan sultans. The proclamation to this effect was apparently issued by his famous Khatri revenue minister, Todar Mal. It was accompanied by a reorganization of the revenue department as well as the other administrative departments by the equally famous Iranian noble Mir Fath-Allah Shirazi. An eighteenth-century historian, Ghulam Husain Taba'taba'i, remembered and recorded this change thus: "Earlier in India the government accounts were written in Hindavi according to the Hindu rule. Raja Todar Mal acquired new regulations [*ẓavābiṭ*] from the scribes [*navisindagan*] of Iran, and the government offices then were reorganized as they were there in *vilayat* [Iran]." ¹⁰

Persian was thereafter on the ascendant, and it was not simply the royal household and the court which came to bear the Iranian impress. As *mutasaddis* and minor functionaries, Iranians could be seen everywhere in government offices, even though they were not in exclusive control of these positions. A substantial part of the administration was still carried out by members of the indigenous Hindu communities who had hitherto worked in Hindavi: importantly, these communities soon learned Persian and joined the Iranians as clerks, scribes, and secretaries (*muharrirs* and *munshis*). Their achievements in the new language were soon recognized as extraordinary. To this development, Akbar's reform in the prevailing *madrasah* education – again planned and executed by the Iranian Mir Fath-Allah Shirazi – contributed considerably. Hindus had already begun to learn Persian in Sikandar Lodi's time, and 'Abdul Qadir Badayuni even mentions a Brahman who taught Arabic and Persian in this period.¹¹ Akbar's enlightened policy and the introduction of secular themes in the syllabi at middle levels had stimulated a wide interest in Persian studies. Hindus—Kayasthas and Khatri in particular—joined *madrasas* in large numbers to acquire excellence in Persian language and literature, which now promised a good career in the imperial service.¹²

From the middle of the seventeenth century, the departments of accountancy (*siyaq*), draftsmanship (*insba*), and the office of revenue minister (*divan*) were mostly filled by these Kayastha and Khatri *munshis* and *muharrirs*. As noted above, Harkaran Das is the first known Hindu *munshi* whose writings were taken as models by later members of the fraternity.¹³ The celebrated Chandrabhan "Brahman" was another influential member of this group, rated second only to the *mir munshi* himself, Sheikh Abu'l Fazl ibn Mubarak (1551–1602). Chandrabhan was a man of versatile skills, and also wrote poetry of high merit.¹⁴ They were followed by a large number of other Kayastha and Khatri *munshis*, including the well-known Madho Ram, Sujan Rai,

Malikzadah, Bhupat Rai, Khushhal Chand, Anand Ram "Mukhlis," Bindraban "Khushghu," and a number of others who made substantive contributions to Indo-Persian language and literature.¹⁵ Selections and specimens of their writings formed part of the syllabi of Persian studies at *madrasas*. Certain areas hitherto unexplored or neglected found skilled investigators, chiefly among Kayasthas and Khatri. They produced excellent works in the eighteenth century in the philological sciences: the *Mir'at al-Istilah* of Anand Ram "Mukhlis," the *Babar-i 'Ajam* of Tek Chand "Bahar," and the *Mustalahat al-Shu'ara* of Siyalkoti Mal "Varasta" are among the most exhaustive lexicons compiled in India. Persian grammars and commentaries on idioms, phrases, and poetical proverbs show their authors' keen interest, extensive research, and unprecedented engagement in the development of Persian in India.¹⁶

Underpinning these developments was undoubtedly the figure of the "ideal" or "perfect" *munshi*, which many of these men aspired to be. Yet what did this mean in concrete terms? A passage from a celebrated letter written by Chandrabhan "Brahman" to his son Khvajah Tej Bhan is worth quoting in this context. He writes:

Initially, it is necessary for one to acquire a training in the [Mughal] system of norms [*akbblaq*]. It is appropriate to listen always to the advice of elders and act accordingly. By studying the *Akblaq-i Nasiri*, *Akblaq-i Jalali*, *Gulistan*, and *Bustan*, one should accumulate one's own capital and gain the virtue of knowledge. When you practice what you have learned, your code of conduct too will become firm. The main thing is to be able to draft in a coherent manner, but at the same time good calligraphy possesses its own virtues and it earns you a place in the assembly of those of high stature. O dear son! Try to excel in these skills. And together with this, if you manage to learn accountancy [*siyaq*], and scribal skill [*navisindagi*], that would be even better. For scribes who know accountancy as well are rare. A man who knows how to write good prose as well as accountancy is a bright light even among lights. Besides, a *munshi* should be discreet and virtuous. I, who am among the *munshis* of the court that is the symbol of the Caliphate, even though I am subject to the usual errors, am still as an unopened bud though possessing hundreds of tongues.

Chandrabhan then goes on to set out the details of a rather full cultural curriculum, showing that the letter was clearly destined for a larger readership than his son alone. He writes:

Although the science of Persian is vast, and almost beyond human grasp, in order to open the gates of language one should read the *Gulistan*, *Bustan*, and the letters of Mulla Jami, to start with. When one has ad-

vanced somewhat, one should read key books on norms and ethics, as well as history books such as the *Habib al-Siyar*, *Rawzat al-Safa*, *Rawzat al-Salatin*, *Tarikh-i Guz'idah*, *Tarikh-i Tabari*, *Zafar-namah*, *Akbar-namah*, and some books like these that are absolutely necessary. The benefits of these will be to render your language elegant, also to provide you knowledge of the world and its inhabitants. These will be of use when you are in the assemblies of the learned. Of the master-poets, here are some whose collections I read in my youth, and the names of which I am writing down. When you have some leisure, read them, and they will give you both pleasure and relief, increase your abilities, and improve your language. They are Hakim Sana'i, Mulla Rum, Shams-i Tabriz, Sheikh Farid al-Din 'Attar, Sheikh Sa'di, Khvajah Hafiz, Sheikh Kirmani, Mulla Jami, and Unsuri, Firdawsi, Jamal al-Din 'Abd al-Razzaq, Kamal Isma'il, Khaqani, Anvari, Amir Khusraw, Hasan Dehlavi, Zahir Faryabi, Kamal Khujandi, Amiq Bukhari, Nizami Aruzi Samarqandi, 'Abd al-Wasi Jabali, Rukn Sa'in, Muhyi al-Din, Mas'ud Bek, Farid al-Din, 'Usman Mukhtari, Nasir Bukhari, Ibn Yamin, Hakim Suzani, Farid Kattib, Abu'l 'Ala Ganjavi, Azraqi, Falaki, Sauda'i, Baba Fighani, Khvajah Kirmani, Asafi, Mulla Bana'i, Mulla 'Imad Khvajah, Ubaid Zakani, Bisati, Lutf-Allah Halavi, Rashid Vatvat, Asir Akhshikati, and Asir Umami. May my good and virtuous son understand that, when I had finished reading these earlier works, I then desired to turn my attention to the later poets and writers and started collecting their poems and *masnavis*. I acquired several copies of their works, and when I had finished them I gave some of them to some of my disciples. Some of these are as follows: Ahli, Hilali, Muhtasham, Vahshi, Qazi Nur, Nargis, Makhfi Ummidi, Mirza Qasim Gunai, Partavi, Jabrani, Hisabi, Sabri, Zamiri Rasikhi, Hasani, Halaki, Naziri, Nau'i, Nazim Yaghma, Mir Haydar, Mir Ma'sum, Nazir, Mashhadi, Vali Dasht Bayazi, and many others who had their collections [*divans*] and *masnavis*, and whose names are too numerous to be listed in this succinct letter.¹⁷

The extensive list cited here is remarkable both for its diversity and programmatic coherence. The list begins with texts on statecraft and moralia, touches on the question of accountancy and epistolography, then moves quickly to a set of histories and chronicles, before ending with an extensive list of poets both old and new. The masters of the Iranian classics obviously found an appreciative audience even among the middle-order literati in big and small towns, as well among village-based revenue officials and other hereditary functionaries and intermediaries. All Mughal government papers, from imperial orders (*farmans*) to bonds and acceptance letters (*muhalkah*, *tamassuk qabuliyat*) that a vil-

lage intermediary (*chaudhuri*) wrote were in Persian.¹⁸ Likewise, there was no bookseller in the bazaars and streets of Agra, Delhi, and Lahore who did not sell manuscript anthologies of Persian poetry. *Madrasah* pupils were in general familiar with the Persian classics, and Persian had practically become the first language of culture in north India.¹⁹ Those steeped in Persian appropriated and used Perso-Islamic expressions such as *Bismillah* (in the name of Allah), *lab-bagur* (at the door of the grave), and *ba jahannam rasid* (damned in hell) just as often as their Iranian and non-Iranian Muslim counterparts did. They would also look for, and appreciate, Persian renderings of local texts and traditions. Indeed, many Hindu scriptures and other Indic texts were rendered into Persian, and these too joined the cultural accessories of the typical Kayastha or Khatri.²⁰ While we cannot present a detailed analysis of each of these texts, at least some of these translations clearly enjoyed circulation outside the relatively rarefied milieu of the court.²¹

Yet the core of the technical "curriculum" for a *munshi* lay elsewhere, notably in epistolography, accountancy, and methods of fiscal management. The *Nigarnamah-i Munshi*, cited briefly above, shows this clearly enough. It was written by an anonymous author who used the pen-names "Munshi" and "Malikzadah," and who had been a member of the entourage of Lashkar Khan, *mir bakshi* in 1670–1. The author then seems to have entered the service of the prince Shah 'Alam, and gone on to hold a series of other posts into the mid-1680s. Around the age of seventy, having accumulated considerable experience, he thought to pen this didactic text. The *Nigarnamah* itself is made up of two sections (*daftar*), which follow an introduction largely devoted to the subject of *insha'* or draftsmanship and epistolography, and the work of prominent *munshis* of the past. The first part is subdivided into four chapters, dealing with the drafting of different kinds of letters: those for princes of the royal blood, those written for nobles, those for *divans*, and orders and letters of appointment. The examples seem to be authored by the writer, "Munshi" himself. The second *daftar* then surveys examples of the work of other prominent *munshis*, including royal orders, orders written on behalf of Prince Shah 'Alam, other letters, and reports – and includes a particular section devoted to one prominent *munshi*, Uday Raj Rustamkhani. Clearly a pantheon of *munshis* existed, and the great exemplars of style were never arbitrarily chosen. Thus, this particular work includes – besides Uday Raj – letters and orders drafted by men like Sheikh 'Abd al-Samad Jaunpuri, Mir Muhammad Raza, and Sa'ad-Allah Khan. The last personage, a prominent *divan* of Shah Jahan's reign, was obviously viewed as one of the heroes of the *munshi* tradition, for one version of the manuscript also reproduces his "Manual of the Divan"

in its first *daftar*.²²

In a complementary vein to the text cited above is the *Khulasat al-Siyāq*, written by Indar Sen, probably a Kayastha, in AH 1115 (1703–4), late in Aurangzeb's reign.²³ This work is mostly concerned with fiscal management: its three central chapters concern key institutions that dealt with accounting, fiscality, and supplies, that is the Divan-i A'la, the Khan-i Saman, and the Bakhshi, and the conclusion includes examples of arithmetic formulae that would be of use for the *munshi* in his accounting (*siyaq*) practice. The introduction sets out the transition from Hindavi accountancy to Persian in the time of Akbar, and emphasizes the need for the *munshi* class to move with the times. Yet, even more than the *Nigarnamah* text, this presents a rather narrow conception of the role of the *munshi*. A rather more comprehensive view can be found in the autobiographical materials from the same broad period, insisting as they do on the formation of the moral universe of the *munshi*.

Nik Rai's Premature Autobiography

The fate of the *munshi* was to wander, since his type of employment required him to travel with a peripatetic patron of the elite class. It is thus no coincidence that the text that we shall discuss here, though largely autobiographical in nature, uses the word "travel" (*safar*) in its title. The work comes from the pen of a seventeenth-century member of a scribal group (probably a Kayastha, though we cannot entirely rule out the possibility he was a Khatri), Nik Rai by name, and seems to emerge from a context in which Persian scribal skills were being ever more widely disseminated and available in increasing numbers to Khatri, Kayasthas, and even some Brahmans. We have noted above that as early as the reign of Akbar, Khatri such as Todar Mal had featured in a prominent place in the revenue administration, but the seventeenth century saw their numbers growing apace, before a veritable explosion in their ranks after 1700. Earlier historians have noted this fact while surveying the writings of Kayastha authors such as Bhimsen (author of the *Tarikh-i Dilkusha*), who accompanied the Mughal armies into the Dakhan in the latter decades of the seventeenth century.²⁴ However, Nik Rai – whose text is a *Bildungsroman* of sorts with a thread of travel running through it – has thus far escaped the attention of historians of the Mughal period. Our discussion is based on a single manuscript of his work; the text is entitled *Tazkirat al-Safar va Tuhfat al-Zafar* (Account of Travels and the Gift of Success), and it was copied by a certain Ram Singh, at the behest of Lala Hazari Mal, who may have been from the author's own family, on 10 Zi-qada AH 1146 (April 1734) in Hyderabad.²⁵ Our discussion will follow the thread of the narrative very closely, paraphrasing and commenting on it.

First-person prose narratives, while less common perhaps in Mughal India than in the Ottoman domains, still had a respectable place in Mughal *belles-lettres*.²⁶ The Mughal emperors themselves had shown the way, for Babur had authored one such text (in Chaghatay Turkish) – arguably the first autobiography in the Islamic world – while Jahangir too had distinguished himself as an author in this genre. In the course of the seventeenth century, some other examples may be found, by authors such as 'Abdul Latif Gujarati, though the real efflorescence comes only in the eighteenth century and the phase of "Mughal decline." At the same time, the autobiographical account was also known in the north Indian vernacular tradition, as the celebrated *Ardhakathanak* of Banarasi Das demonstrates. In this panorama, the text by Nik Rai must count as an early example of an Indian first-person account in Persian, unusual for its time perhaps, but not quite unique. It shares a feature with Banarasi Das's text, namely its concern with the author's childhood and youth, rather than with his mature years. In fact, Nik Rai's account is even more "half a tale" than the *Ardhakathanak* (whose author stopped in about his fiftieth year), for it ends when its author has barely reached his early to mid-twenties.

We should note at the outset that Nik Rai's text is written in a deliberately difficult and flowery Persian, and begins with the praise of God and of the "pen." The initial theme that is treated is not travel, as might be suggested by the title, but rather speech (*sukhan*). The first page and a half of the manuscript are devoted to an elucidation of the invocatory term *Bismillah al-rahman al-rahim*, including the construction of its letters, the idea of justice that it embodies, and so on. Nik Rai's model here seems to be the prose of Abu'l Fazl, and some verses follow with allusions to the ancients and other prestigious figures. We then move from speech (*sukhan*) to the pen (*qalam*) in the space of some lines, as well as to the subject of the craftsmanship of God. As with Abu'l Fazl, the use of Arabic phrases here is quite limited. Once the initial framing in terms of the wonders of God's creation has been established, the proper text of his narrative begins. This prefatory *hamd* section is extremely artful and clever, and even manages to incorporate the name of the reigning monarch, 'Alamgir. A sample of it runs as follows.

The account of the disturbed conditions of this sinful *faqir*, who with the help of fortune and the support of thoughtfulness has entered the alley of the pen, and the field of paper, to venture a description, is on account of the grace of God. May this account be able to apply the kohl of experience to the eye. It is like a light-giving lamp in the night of thought. Just as the movement of the pen brings light onto the blank page, may this account bring light to the night in the city of transitory being. This is a pious account

[*ziker-i kbayr*]:

Even if I am not pious,

I am the dust of the feet of the pious.

[*Agarchib Nik niyam*

Khak-i pa-i Nik anam]

The play here is obviously on the author's own name, Nik Rai. This is followed by another verse, perhaps more indicative of his own (non-Muslim) identity:

No wonder I am not thirsty

I am an earthen pot of basil.

Nik Rai then explains his title, *Tazkirat al-Safar va Tuhfat al-Zafar*, which mentions both travel and Dar al-Zafar (or Bijapur). We then move at last to the beginning of his account proper, or the *aghaz-i dastan* (fol. 3b).

In the thirteenth regnal year of Aurangzeb, on 14 Zi'l-Hijja 1080 (4 May 1670), a Thursday (here we find some astrological details), Nik Rai was born, so he tells us, in the city of Amanabad-Allahabad; this corresponds, he states, to the year 1726 Samvat of Raja Bikramajit, the calendar that is preferred by the Indian Brahmans (*ba nazdik-i barahmanan-i Hind*). His birthplace, he takes care to note, is also called Prayag; the town has excellent buildings, and is on the banks of the river Ganges. A Brahman astrologer, Debi Dutt, was summoned at his birth by his father and grandfather, and on his advice the child was called Nik Rai – “Pious” or “Fortunate” – and the name had some effect, in the sense of allowing him access to science and culture (*ilm va adab*) as well as honor, distinction, and a good rank (*mansab*) already in his youth. He reproduces the *za'ichab* or astrological chart made at his birth faithfully in the text; it is in the “Indian style,” though it contains Persian names and terms. He then proceeds at some length to explain the chart and the extent to which it has in fact influenced his life, as well as things that might have happened – but which in fact did not.

We return then to a description of Allahabad itself (*tamsif-i savad-i baldab-i Ilahabad*). Nik Rai tells us that he will provide a view of the town that will show his command over the art of description. It is not just a town located on a river but one that brings salvation to all of Hindustan. Its lanes and bazaars are wonderful, and in their description, the metaphors all relate to water: the lanes are like rivers, the walls like waves, and so on. The town has a fort made of stone, both powerful and beautiful, and built by the monarch Jalal al-Din Akbar. It reaches up to the sky, but its reflections plumb the water. Its walls are as strong as the *sadd-i Sikandari*, Alexander's wall against Gog and Magog. Inside it is a building called the Chihil Sutun, with buildings of marble that seem to emerge from the water itself. There follows a long aside on storms on the Ganges, which happen every hundred years or so; they are apparently as power-

ful as the storm of the time of Noah, and bring destruction, uprooting trees, and flooding water everywhere. The town has many gardens such as the Jahanara Bagh. His own description of the town, writes the immodest Nik Rai, is as if he were weaving silk, even as his pen moves on silken paper.

We become quickly aware in the course of these initial pages that the entire family of Nik Rai is made up of *munshis*. When Ilahwardi Khan Ja'far became governor of Allahabad, the author's grandfather and father were employed by him, the former as *divan* and the latter as *bakhshi*.²⁷ But unfortunately, the khan died a month before Nik Rai's birth, which caused numerous problems for the father and grandfather. This suggests the ultimate dependence of these “service gentry” on an elite class of patrons, to the extent that they sometimes took the name of their patron as a sort of surname. Amanullah Khan, the son of the deceased, did provide employment to them for a little over two years. Then Nik Rai's grandfather died at the end of three years, “like a fruit-giving tree that had outlived its time.” This grandfather is portrayed as a formidable and rather wealthy man. When Ilahwardi Khan had been governor of Shahjahanabad, the grandfather had built a fine house (*imarat-i 'ali*) in that city. Then, Ilahwardi was transferred to Akbarabad (Agra), and the grandfather followed him there and built another house (*kakh-i ayvan*), with fine decorations. The grandfather also had a house in Mathura, described as a *baveli-i dilkusha*. Since the grandfather had a number of friends, he even built a house in the city of Benares, where people in India come on pilgrimage (*mataf*); he also had a garden in Gorakhpur. This leads Nik Rai to cite a verse from Sa'di: “Whoever came [to the world], built a new house.” He then left, and another took care of it.

The grandfather's death was a major blow to the family and an occasion of great mourning. Soon after, Husain 'Ali Khan, brother of Ilahwardi Khan, was sent as governor to Allahabad and gave employment to Nik Rai's father; this was in the eighteenth regnal year of Aurangzeb, when Nik Rai was five years old. This implies incidentally that his father, Lal Bihari, had no employment for some two or three years, but that attachments to a particular patron's extended family remained strong. As for the young Nik Rai, he began his formal education at the beginning of his sixth year, in keeping with tradition (*az ru-'i rasm va 'adat*), with the first Persian letters on a tablet (*lawh-i abjadkhnani*). Soon enough, Husain 'Ali was called back to the Mughal capital, and Lal Bihari accompanied him to Delhi. Since he had some relatives in Agra, Nik Rai was sent off to stay with them for a time. His teacher there was Durvesh Muhammad Jaunpuri, and Nik Rai tells us that the light of understanding thus began to dawn within him under the tutelage of this first master. Two years were thus

spent gaining an initial training in reading, writing and the rudiments of Persian. At about seven years of age, he began to enter into Persian literature, and had his first readings of Sheikh Sa'di; he also moved to Delhi. It was at this stage that he was married off to the daughter of Daya Ram, son of Bhagwan Das Shuja'i; a brief and rather conventional description of the marriage follows, and we are told that we are now in the twentieth regnal year. At this time, Lal Bihari decided to change patrons, and became attached to a certain Tahir Khan, who was given the *faujdar* of *sarkar* Mu'azzamabad or Gorakhpur (this was a powerful post, in view of the economic expansion in the area at this time). Lal Bihari was given the posts of *pishdast* and *mushrif* (or overseer) in charge of the lands and commons (*kharaabab*). Nik Rai moved there as well shortly thereafter, with the rest of his family. He mentions Gorakhpur as an open and spacious place, and pleasant to live in. But soon after he moved there, Tahir Khan was transferred from the spot, and moved back to Delhi via Jaunpur and Allahabad, since the alternative route through Awadh and Lucknow was considered more difficult. On the way was the holy site of Kachauchha, where they went in pilgrimage to the tomb of the Chishti saint Shah Ashraf Jahangir. The central story about Kachauchha recounted in the text is as follows. When Shah Ashraf arrived there, only a few Muslims were in residence, and these lived in fear of a certain pandit-jogi. When Shah Ashraf came through there, people complained to him, and he made inquiries about the jogi. It was found that he was a great practitioner of magic (*sifr va fusun*), and like the master of Harut and Marut (two fallen angels, who were great magicians). But the Shah with a glance began to burn the jogi, who was obliged to beg for mercy and admit defeat.

There is no doubt that the shrine has great power, writes Nik Rai. It is a place where diseases that are reputed to be incurable can be cured. During his lifetime Shah Ashraf had told the merchants (*baqqalan*) of the town that the expenses of those who came to the shrine would be defrayed from his own family's resources. The merchants would therefore advance the visitors grain in the knowledge that their payment was secure. Nik Rai's own paternal uncle, Pratap Mal, had an alcohol problem and had become dry like a stick. No doctor could cure him, and finally he was brought to Kachauchha. After three months of ceremonies (involving offerings of milk, etc.), he recovered his health. Near the shrine was a garden, inhabited by djinns and spirits (*asibzudab*) whose conversations could be heard by mortals. They would climb on trees and generally create a ruckus. But those who were possessed by spirits, especially women, could be cured by coming to the garden. The wonder of the place was that even if women were hung upside down, their clothes remained more or less in place; no indecent exposure occurred. This, Nik Rai assures us, is

a true story and not some fantasy on his part; he also makes it clear that he has a personal devotion to certain Sufi shrines, especially those of the Chishti order.

The family's return to Delhi occurs in the text after this digression in Kachauchha, and the absence from the Mughal capital seems to have lasted no more than seven months. Delhi itself now merits brief mention, as a wonderful place with excellent buildings and beautiful women. It seems that Nik Rai had entered a new phase of awareness, since he begins to speak now of the sensual pleasures of the town. Shahjahanabad is a place, he writes, where hundreds of handsome Yusufs pursue their Zulaykhas. It is a place where the air is like the breath of Jesus, bringing the dead back to life. This is another set of passages with allusions and comparisons, another moment where Nik Rai shows his mastery of, among other things, Old Testament metaphors. Thus, the *dabirs* of the town wield their pens like the staff of Moses and the trees on the bank of the river are like pearls in beard of the Pharaoh. He mentions the canal made in the time of Shah Jahan by the great Iranian noble 'Ali Mardan Khan, whose waters are so sweet (*shirin*) as to be the envy of Farhad himself (fol. 13b). The great fort had been made there by the second Shahib-Qiran (that is, Shah Jahan), and was hence called Shahjahanabad. There are also old forts here such as Tughlaqabad which touch the very sky. If Amir Khusraw, emperor of the land of speech, were alive today, writes Nik Rai, he would have taken his mastery of the word to the sky (the idea being that the objects of this time are so much better than those of Khusraw's time). Delhi is thus called "Little Mecca" (*Khvurd Makka*) by people of the day. Every year, pilgrims go to the shrine of Hazrat Khvajah Qutb al-Din Bakhtiyar Kaki (another Chishti saint) to prostrate themselves there, and attain what they want. Verses follow in praise of Qutb al-Din, taken from Amir Khusraw and other authors. Nik Rai also recounts an incident involving the great Chishti Sufi Nizam al-Din Awliya and a verse of his disciple Amir Khusraw, the recitation of which had occasioned the death of Mulla Ahmad Mimar.

Despite these digressions, the central thread continues to be the education of the author. Nik Rai begins now to reside in the town and study with Sheikh Khayr-Allah, nephew of Durvesh Muhammad, his earlier teacher. He studies the *Gulistan* and *Bustan* of Sa'di, the *Tutinamah*, and the *Sikandar Namah* of Nizami, but soon the sheikh has to leave town, as he is given a post in the Lucknow area, in *baveli* Selak. So Nik Rai begins to study instead with Sayyid 'Abdul Qadir Lahauri, to whom he is introduced by his father. He praises this new teacher, who was in his view one of the best-educated men of his time. At this time, Mas'um Khan, son of Shahnawaz Khan, was made *faujdar* of Gorakhpur, and Nik Rai's father (who already knew him) went with him as *divan*

and *bakhshi*, advancing in his career “as Yusuf had in his time.” Instead of going back to Gorakhpur, Nik Rai and his family were left behind, this time in Mathura, still another praiseworthy town that steals the hearts of people, as noted by the poet Mulla ‘Ali. The metaphor Nik Rai uses now is to compare the town and its people to a text written in *nasta‘liq* or in *naskh*. He even praises the style of speech here (probably Brajbhasa), as more beautiful than elsewhere. The river plays a prominent role in this town, with extensive steps (the ghats) of stone. Sacred-thread wearing Brahmans (*zunnardaran-i Hind*) come from afar to reside here, some two thousand in number. The sweets of this town are so famous that people carry them away as gifts; they are made of milk and sugar, and can be preserved for a number of days without going bad. The town is apparently particularly beautiful during the rainy season.

Nik Rai then enters into less savory aspects of the town of Mathura. It is said that Bir Singh Dev Bundela, at the time of Akbar, had killed ‘Allami Sheikh Abu’l Fazl near Gwalior at the behest of Prince Salim, and that in appreciation for this Salim (when he came to the throne) gave all the property of Sheikh Abu’l Fazl to the raja. The raja requested permission from the sultan to use this large sum of money to make an impressive place of worship (*ma‘bad*) reaching up to the sky in Mathura. This – he declared – was in the interests of the pursuit of the spiritual. Thousands of people would come there in pilgrimage, and festivals and fairs were held there. This went on until the time when the Emperor Aurangzeb, “in consideration of matters external to spirituality” decided to tear it down. The act was carried out by Husayn ‘Ali Khan, the *jamjdar* of Mathura, who “made a mosque from the temple” (*az ma‘bad masjid tartib yaf*). Nik Rai is disapproving of this act, and cites a verse in this context of the seventeenth-century poet Chandrabhan “Brahman,” mentioning him by name:

*Bibin karamat-i butkhanab-i mara ay Shaykh
Kih chun kharab shavad kbanab-i Khuda gardad.*

[Look at the miracle of my idol-house, o Sheikh.

That when it was ruined, it became the House of God.]

So, although devoted to Chishti saints and a member of a family with an extensive tradition of service to the Mughals, Nik Rai sees the times in which he lives with a certain irony. This digression on the temple-turned-mosque leads him into a rather extended discussion of *vahdat al-vujud* and *vahdat-i adyan*, the Unity of Being and the Unity of All Religion, which must be read as an implicit criticism of these acts during the time of Mughal rule. Remove the dust of bigotry from the cheek of the Beloved, he remonstrates; don’t trust what you see, which is mere appearance (*zahir-bin*). What is the difference after all between stone and glass, though one may break the other? The religion of ‘Isa and the religion of

Musa seem to be different, but when you really look into it, they are the same. The appearance of each letter may be different, but when you combine them in a word, they acquire a different sense. The wave, the drop, and the bubble seem different, of course, but are they really so (fol. 18b)? The possibility of reconciliation between apparent opposites is also suggested by him through a verse from Rumi: those who are prisoners of color will make even Moses fight with himself, while those who have gone beyond color (*bi-rangi*) can reconcile even Moses and the Pharaoh.

This further digression being completed, Nik Rai returns to the matter of his own education. In Mathura he completes his study of the *Tutinamah* and the *Sikandar-namah*; he next begins to read Abu’l Fazl’s letters, the writings of Jami and the *Mu‘ammiyat-i Husayni*. However, he has been in Mathura barely a year when his father calls him and the rest of the family to Gorakhpur. This leads him to describe Qasbah Gorakhpur; this place and Mathura do not qualify in his view for the more dignified term *baldah*. From a distance it appears large, but when one approaches one realizes that the population is small but widely dispersed, like the inflated hearts of lovers. Here is a shrine of Sayyid Ghalib Shahid, which is so miraculous that lions frequent it without harming the humans, as in the proverb where the lion lies down with the lamb. The Ruhin river goes by the town. This brings him to a description of the residence made there by his grandfather, less than half a *kos* from the river, and even closer in the rainy season. These are clearly pleasurable memories for Nik Rai, of boat rides on the river and other leisure activities in the rainy season. The bananas, pineapples, and other fruits of the town come in for special praise. This would seem to be linked to the garden the family has there: its plants and their special vegetables and fruits are listed in some detail. In the bazaar, one finds excellent fish, and the rice is available at the cheap price of two *man-i shahjahan* (each 33.5 kg) for a rupee. The lemons and mangoes too are truly delicious, juicy and (in the case of the latter) extraordinarily sweet.

By now, Nik Rai has grown to the age of ten years, and he reads the *Qiran al-Sa‘dayn* of Amir Khusraw and other texts of greater complexity. These one or two years were truly happy ones, he states, but like all good things they had to come to an end. People grew jealous of his father and complained about him to the *jamjdar*, so that the family was obliged to return to Delhi, this time via Awadh, crossing the Ghaggar and Saryu, a difficult journey. A description follows of the banks of the Saryu, with its beautiful trees and scenic qualities. A boat ride is taken on the bow-like bend in the river, and its undulating waves bring out more poetry in him. Nik Rai loves to compare everything to the Persian letters; if something is like a *be*, something else is like a *qaf*, and so

on. They thus arrive in the town of Awadh, which he takes time to describe, linking it once more to obvious religious themes. For this is the place where Rama and Lakshmana were born, he notes, and “we people” (*ma mardum*) are attached to the faith of these gods.

He feels obliged to give a rapid version of the story of Ramachandra, noting that at the age of ten, this prince had learnt the sacred sciences from Bishvamitra, and began to bring out a hundred meanings from his pen. Then, he went to the court of Raja Janaka, and won the hand of Sita at her *svyamvar* by bending the bow. Throughout this passage, the characteristic obsession with the letters of the Persian alphabet pursues Nik Rai. The marriage of Rama and Sita takes place, and they return to Awadh, meeting Parashurama on the way. But once in Awadh, problems begin with his step-mother. Rama is obliged to leave the town and go into the forest in exile (*bishagardi*) with Lakshmana and Sita, heading towards the Dakhan. Nik Rai recounts the incident of the golden deer, leading to the futile chase by first Rama and then Lakshmana, and Sita’s kidnapping by Ravana to Lanka. The figure of Hanuman is now brought in rapidly, who leaps over the sea (*darya-i shor*) to go and find her. Hanuman sets fire to the town and returns. With his army of monkeys, Rama then builds a bridge over the sea, and reaches the island of Lanka. The battle begins, and Ravana’s son Indrajit wounds Lakshmana. Hanuman then flies off to find the Sanjivani, and brings back the mountain a thousand leagues in the wink of an eye. Eventually, Rama kills Ravana and sends him to hell (*vasil-i jahannam*) with an arrow, and Rama, Lakshmana, and Sita return to Awadh. Rama begins to rule, as his father has died in the meanwhile. When his end approaches, it is written in the history books (*kih chunachih dar tavarikh-i Hind*), he gathered together some persons and left the town, in the direction of the Sarais of Eternity.

Even today, writes Nik Rai, when one comes to Awadh, one feels an unseen presence here, and the people of his own party too felt it. Four days later, the party covered the forty leagues to the town of Lucknow. The stone fort and bazaars of this town strike our author favorably, to say nothing of the excellent bridge with high arches on the Gomti river, which passes below the town flowing towards Jaunpur. The town itself is highly populated, and the matchlockmen (*banduqchis*) of the area are well-known in all of India. But this competence also causes problems for the *faujdar*s of the area, as there is much potential rebelliousness here. From Lucknow, the party moves on to Qannauj, and Nik Rai makes some snide remarks on the miserly nature of the people there. Near there is Makanpur, where one finds the shrine of the mystic Badi’ al-Din Madar, known as Shah Madar, of the *silsilah* of ‘Abd al-Qadir Jilani. This is a relatively brief mention with some praise, but no

stories of his prowess are added. In fact, it is not even clear whether Nik Rai actually visits Makanpur, since it seems to be a bit out of the way. The party is then quickly on its way to Agra.

The experiment with new patrons has clearly failed, ending in jealousy and unhappiness. The father of Nik Rai now goes to Gwalior, to enter once more into the service of an old employer, Amanullah Khan, son of Ilahwardi Khan. The khan sends him as *amin* of his own *jagir* at Jalesar. Jalesar is described as place with a mud fort, which is however as strong as one made of stone. Here too is a *dargah* of one Sayyid Ibrahim, which is a place that is frequented by pilgrims, especially on Thursday evenings (fol. 27a). The town is noted for its enamel workers (*minagaran*), who are known for embedding pieces into pots and dishes, including calligraphy with enamel. There are several furnaces in which special stones that are found in the region are treated. There seems to be some link between the enamel workers and the *dargah* of Ibrahim, who may have been some sort of founder-*pir* of the settlement. The enamel work is described as being done as wax was melted in the hands of the Biblical David. Nik Rai even describes his visit to one of the workshops (*karkhanah*) to inspect the works there.

He remains in Jalesar for about a year in all. In this period, he continues his education with the letters of Abu’l Fazl, as well as completing the other texts that he has mentioned earlier. His knowledge of Abu’l Fazl becomes deeper, and he even cites some crucial passages and aphorisms from his letters (*az qalam-i ‘Allami Shayekh Abu’l Fazl in nikat-i chand*), including reflections on the question of religion (*mazhab*). There is clearly a continuity between this and the earlier passage on *vahdat al-vujud*. The continuing influence of Abu’l Fazl on the *munshi* class is evident here, not only in terms of his political philosophy but also his understanding of the working of a bureaucracy, the seven key principles for the functioning of a state, and so on. In a similar vein, Nik Rai quotes from the *Mu‘ammiyat-i Husayni*, and from Jami’, but these are less significant in the text than his quotations from Abu’l Fazl.

Among other new texts he studies at this time are the *Divan-i ‘Urfi Shirazi*, *Kulliyat-i Hakim Anbad al-Din Anvari*, *Tuhfat al-Iraqayn*, *Divan-i Afzal al-Din Khaqani*, and others, all of which are briefly mentioned and commented upon. Khaqani struck him, for example, for his profound use of words. He also cites some verses from some of these books. This is also the time when he begins to read contemporary Mughal poets (*tazab guyan*, or “fresh speakers”), which – as their name suggests – gave him a sense of freshness. Amongst these are Sa’ib Tabrizi and Mirza Jalal “Asir,” of whom the latter comes in for particular praise; verses from both poets are cited in the text. He also quotes some of his own

verses, which follow the style of Tabrizi. Similarly, he reads the poems of Ghani Kashmiri, whose use of ambiguity (*san'at-i ibam*) is noted, and those of Wahid Tahir. The list continues with Haji Muhammad Jan Qudsi, the *malik al-shu'ara'* of the time of Shah Jahan, and Abu'l Barakat Munir, Talib Amuli, Kalim, and Muhammad Quli Salim. In each case, Nik Rai gives us a few examples and his own appreciation of their particular skills. He also reads the *Majalis al-'Ushshaq* of Sultan Husayn Bayqara, the section on poets in Khvandmir's *Habib al-Siyar*, and Mawlana 'Arif al-Din 'Ali Yazdi's *Zafar Namah*. The list is an extensive one and would seem to make up the complete education of the *munshi*. This is also the occasion for him to point out the crucial differences between Iranian and Indian poets. These include Munir Lahauri's critique of the style of the *tazab guyan* (the "innovative" Mughal-Safavid poets), as well as the comments of Mulla Shayda, with a brief mention of who these authors were. Nik Rai also mentions several less noted Indian poets, such as Mulla Anvar Lahauri, Mulla 'Ata'i Jaunpuri, and Mulla Tufayli Fathpuri, and offers his own praise of them, thus locating his own position in the debate squarely on the side of the *tazab guyan*. These are presented in the context of various debates (*munazarat*), including one between Mulla Firuz and Talib. At issue is the capacity both to utter verses and to understand them (*shi'r gu'i* versus *shi'r fahm*). Here, Nik Rai seems to anticipate in some respects of the position taken by the grammarian and critic Khan-i Arzu in the eighteenth century.

All this literary training occupied Nik Rai up to the age of fourteen, the remaining time having been spent in Jalesar and then perhaps Agra. He now returns briefly to his family's residence in Mathura (fol. 34b). Although it is finally time to move towards the Dakhan, in which direction the emperor himself has already set out, he spends further a six months in Mathura. His first son is born there, with the chronogram for his birth date given as *miva-i bagh-i dil* ("the fruit of the heart's garden"). Extensive celebrations are held on the occasion, with music and other signs of joy. But this happiness is about to be diminished, for Nik Rai's father dies in AH 1097. His passing is recorded with a large number of verses of mourning. The chronogram of his father's death is given as "Lal Bihari left the world like a sigh." This was the end of his carefree youth, writes Nik Rai, and the beginning of serious responsibilities. Thus, a new phase is marked by his father's death, coinciding with his own passage to fatherhood.

The time of my early youth had passed

And the time of frolicking too had gone.

The moment has come for him to find employment, and some six months later – after long reflections on this subject – he moves on the matter. At this time, the routes from Delhi to Agra were disturbed by bandits

and trouble makers. So the powerful noble of Iranian origin (and uncle of Aurangzeb), Shayista Khan, was brought there from Bengal as governor in place of Khan Jahan Bahadur. In view of the uncertain conditions, Nik Rai decided to leave Mathura for Agra with his mother and other relatives for more safety. A brief description of Agra follows, including its impressive buildings, gardens (a number of which are mentioned by name), and *sara'is*, the marble tomb of Mumtaz Mahal – the Taj Mahal – and the fact that the town was founded shortly after AH 900. The site of Sikandra and Akbar's tomb there are also mentioned in passing.

By now, we are in the latter half of the 1680s. It is known, Nik Rai notes, that the Dakhani cities of Dar al-Zafar Bijapur and Dar al-Jihad Hyderabad were conquered in the thirty-second regnal year, creating a number of new opportunities. Nik Rai's older brother, Sobha Chand, who was both competent and courageous, had already obtained a job in Bijapur as intendant of the *topkhanab* (artillery) and the *dagh va tashibab* (branding of horses and recruitment of men). Sobha Chand was the head of the family and at the time about forty years old. It was hence time for Nik Rai to seek his fortune there too, and on 18 Shawwal of the thirty-third regnal year, he and his family reached Bijapur, accompanying his brother's party. A brief account follows of the journey between Agra and Bijapur, in the course of which Nik Rai himself fell rather ill. The travel is compared to the Sufi's penance (*chillah*) as the journey was not easy, passing through jungles, and mountainous territories, with rains also impeding their progress. The itinerary is then detailed (fol. 44b). After Agra, the next large town is Gwalior, at a distance of three *manzil*. There were beautiful women to be seen all along the way, as Nik Rai's roving eye notes. On reaching Gwalior, he refers to the excellent and high fort there, considered to be one of the largest in Hindustan. Those who were imprisoned by the emperor's direct order are kept there. Inside the fort is a large pond. The speech (here perhaps a form of Braj or Madhyadeshi, identified by Khan-i Arzu in the eighteenth century as "Gwaliyari") in the place is very sweet, and there are also lots of *chameli* flowers to be seen. The betel-leaf (*pan*) in the area is of high quality. From Gwalior, the party makes its way to Narwar, where too the *pan* leaves catch his attention, as do the birds. A large step-well (*baoli*) is to be seen outside the town of Narwar, where people gather in the evening. The women who come to get water from the *baoli* with a rope are described as marvelous, capable of giving even those magical creatures Harut and Marut lessons in sorcery. The people in general are of an excellent temperament, and wear colorful clothes; to wear white in the place is taken as a sign of mourning. If one were to spend time looking at the women here all day long, one would lose one's heart several times. But one

is not allowed to even touch them with one's hand. Here too is a river that flows below the fort. Nik Rai believes that this is the fort of Raja Nal, about whom that great poet, the *malik al-shu'ara'* Abu'l Faiz "Payzi," had written in his *masnavi* on *Nal-Daman*.

From Narwar, they move on to Sironj, a place with excellent air and a good bazaar with quality grapes. Here too, the language is sweet to hear, and people wear attractive clothes and are attractive to look at. A small river is crossed, and then they move on to Sarangpur. All these places seem to please our traveler, who praises them in poetic terms quite unstintingly, noting that this part of the journey is full of pleasure (*'aysh*). Presently they reach Shahjahanpur, a *qasbah* with royal buildings, where they prepare to cross a major hurdle in the form of a river. Having reached the other side, they find both sides of it prosperous and well populated. The bridge on the river too is excellent in terms of its arches. They find that they are now in Dar al-Fath Ujjain, a town which is remarkable for its prosperous character, a paradise-like city that is among the most ancient of Hindustan. It was here according to the Hindus (*bi i'liqad-i mardum-i Hunud*) that the famous and generous Raja Bikramajit (Vikramaditya) had his throne (*takhtgah*), and it is also a sacred city. Stories of this monarch circulate extensively in Hindustan, writes Nik Rai. The artisans of the area are remarkable for their skills, in particularly in making jewelry. From this place on, Sobha Chand is given an imperial escort. Among the excellent places in the vicinity of the town is a waterfall (called *abshar-i Kaliyadah*). This inspires a verse to say that in all of Hindustan Nik Rai had seen no place more beautiful than Kaliyadah.

Four *manzils* later, they come to the banks of the river Narbada, which is considered to be the frontier of Hindustan and the Dakhan (*sarhad-i Hindustan ast va Dakan*). The waters flow so rapidly in the river that it could be dangerous for boats. Crossing the river, they reach a place called Baqirpur, saying farewell at last to Hindustan proper. The travel from now on is far more unpleasant, largely on camel-back, including the crossing of a pass which leads them to Jahangirpur. The passage is very picturesque however, and they next traverse an extensive plain to reach Burhanpur. They also pass by the great fort of Asir, a league to the north of Burhanpur; this is located on a high hill, and reminds the author of Daulatabad. Here too, imperial prisoners are kept. Burhanpur for its part is described as a town with good waters, excellent and handsome people, and a popular bazaar. Through the Fardapur Pass, they go on to Aurangabad. This is a rougher and more mountainous route, with dry and rocky ground, and many mules are to be seen in these areas carrying goods from one spot to the other. Eventually, with some difficulty, they reach Aurangabad, some distance from the fort of Daulata-

bad, a formidable and high spot. Some people in Mughal service come from Bijapur to meet the party there.

Two weeks later, with these others, they set out and think of going via Parinda fort, and from there to Sholapur, which was in the region of Bijapur. This was a pleasant spot, reminiscent in many respects of Hindustan, which Nik Rai has already begun to feel homesick for. Crossing the Bhima river, they eventually reach the city of Bijapur. A few verses celebrate their arrival, where with the help of his older brother (and the grace of the emperor) Nik Rai too is given a job. In this work Nik Rai spends four years, to the time of the completion of his account, when he is still in his early twenties. By way of conclusion, he writes:

In sum, having completed the journey, the town of Dar al-Zafar was reached. With the aid and intercession of my older brother, who was full of high virtues and ethics, and who held me in affection and benevolence, I was given the honor of the service of the assessment of the expenses of the *parganas* of *sarkar* Haveli Dar al-Zafar and Nusratabad. Until, on account of the convergence of good fortune and the gift of God (*'ata-i vahib al-'aliyat*), in the beginning of fortunate Zi-qada of the thirty-eighth regnal year, my brother was honored by being appointed the *pisbdast* of the Mir Atish, and this smallest of slaves [of God] in his place was appointed to the intendancy of the *topkhanah* and the *dagh va tashibah* of Bijapur. And a very appropriate *mansab*, in keeping my present stature, was granted.

Nik Rai thanks God for this bounty and ends the text with appropriate verses. The copyist's colophon follows, suggesting that the text and its author's family continued to have a connection with the Dakhan.²⁸

Conclusion

As we suggested at the outset, the text of the *Tazkirat al-Safar* falls into a larger category of materials, wherein notables and literati from Mughal India wrote first-person accounts in which travel played a more or less important role. We have already mentioned the case of 'Abdul Latif Gujarati from the early seventeenth century, and we could add other near-contemporary texts such as those of Mirza Nathan and Shihab al-Din Talish to our list, though these last authors also insert wider historical materials into their accounts. Later in the eighteenth century, writers such as Anand Ram "Mukhlis" then raised this form to an ever higher level of subtlety, since it permitted them to be ironic about their own communities, the political system, and even the monarchy. In each of these writings, elements of the ethnographic are quite strongly present, as are ekphrastic aspects – including in the case of Nik Rai, the description of towns, sites, buildings, and the like. Such

descriptions are perhaps characteristic of individuals who inhabited the fringes of the Mughal state, since they borrow from the vocabulary of the state (with its own drive to produce gazetteer-like *dastur al-'amal* texts in the seventeenth century). It would probably not be too abusive to see in these materials the formation of a north Indian class that was similar to the Chinese literati class, even though the existence of the examination system and its curriculum in imperial China somewhat skewed the nature of that knowledge formation.²⁹

We are unable at present to follow the later career of Nik Rai, or to determine the extent of success he eventually enjoyed as a *munshi* in the latter decades of Aurangzeb's reign. In any event, his trajectory as an individual interests us less than his exemplary character, as a member of the Persianized Hindu scribal groups that came increasingly to serve the Mughals in the seventeenth century. We have seen how comfortably he straddles a diversity of cultural and literary heritages, and this is a comfort that we shall find in later characters of the eighteenth century such as Anand Ram "Mukhlis."³⁰ Nik Rai is of course aware that he is not a Muslim, and that the story of Rama is a part of his own heritage, but he is equally comfortable with Chishti saints and their shrines. The term "composite culture" has been much used and abused in recent years, but arguably one can find it in the life and education of such a *munshi*.

Four key features of his education as suggested in Nik Rai's text immediately spring to mind. The first is an absence, for it is noticeable that he does not speak of the technical aspects that other texts (like the *Nigar-namah-i Munshi*) insist upon. In view of the post that he eventually came to hold in the Dakhan, Nik Rai must have learned *siyāq*, and had a course in fiscal literacy (as it were); the affairs of the *divan* must have been no mystery to him. Yet nowhere in his account of his education does he even speak of it, as if such banal details were beneath mention. A second aspect is the close relationship between the curriculum of texts that he sets out, and that defined for his own son by Chandrabhan "Brahman," which makes it clear that the latter's view was no idealized normative template but a rather practical piece of advice. No doubt different teachers took different routes to these texts, and each student too must have developed his own tastes and preferences. Nik Rai's own fondness for writers such as Vahid Tahir, Ghani Kashmiri, Sa'ib Tabrizi, and Mirza Jalal Asir has already been noted.

A third aspect, in our judgment a crucial one, is the fulcral role of Sheikh Abu'l Fazl in the world of the seventeenth-century *munshi*. Nik Rai admires and imitates the style and also the attitudes of the great *Mir Munshi*, and he was surely not alone in this matter. For Abu'l Fazl had come by this time to stand for a point of view in which ecumenical learning and religious plural-

ism were given a high standing, besides the fact that he (together with his brother, the poet Fayzi) also embodied a self-confident Indian claim to the use of the Persian language. A specifically Mughal political and literary tradition thus had come to exist by the mid-seventeenth century, one that differed from its Central Asian and Iranian counterparts, and we must trace this back in part to the late sixteenth century and its usages, when Abu'l Fazl was the great ideologue of the remembered Akbari dispensation. A fourth aspect is the broader cultural framework within which Nik Rai places the issue of his *Bildung*. If he eschews narrowly technical questions regarding his training and education, it is also clear time and again that the Persian language itself plays a key role in his view of the world. It is through this language, its metaphors and possibilities, that he accedes to and imagines the world around him. The philosophical universe within which he conceives of all matters – including issues of social and religious conflict – is impregnated with Persian, and with all the richness of the "secular" tradition that Indo-Persian represented by the seventeenth century. It is in this sense that we must understand what it meant to become, and to be, a *munshi* in the later Mughal world.

NOTES

¹C. A. Bayly, *Empire and Information: Intelligence Gathering and Social Communication in India, 1780–1870* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 73–8; Michael Fisher, "The Office of Akhbar Nawis: The Transition from Mughal to British Forms," *Modern Asian Studies* 27:1 (1993): 45–82.

²On one such *munshi*, Kishan Sahay from Bihar, who served Antoine Polier, see Muzaffar Alam and Seema Alavi, *A European Experience of the Mughal Orient: The I'jaz-i Arsalani (Persian Letters, 1773–1779) of Antoine-Louis Henri Polier* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2001), 13–14.

³A similar figure is the *munim*, on whom see C.A. Bayly, *Rulers, Townsmen and Bazaars: North Indian Society in the Age of British Expansion, 1770–1870* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 377–8.

⁴Kapil Raj, "When Humans Become Instruments: The Indo-British Exploration of Tibet and Central Asia in the Mid-Nineteenth Century," in *Instruments, Travel and Science: Itineraries of Precision from the Seventeenth to the Twentieth Century*, ed. Marie-Noëlle Bourguet, Christian Licoppe, and Hans Otto Sibum (London: Routledge, 2002).

⁵Mirza Khan ibn Fakhr al-Din Muhammad, *Tuhfat al-Hind*, ed. Nur al-Hasan Ansari (Tehran: Bunyad-i Farhang-i Iran, 1975).

⁶On this text, see S. Nurul Hasan, "Nigar Nama-i Munshi: A valuable collection of documents of Aurangzeb's Reign," *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress*, 15th Session (Gwalior: Indian History Congress, 1952), 258–63.

⁷Francis Balfour, ed. and trans., *Insba'-i Harkaran* (Calcutta: Charles Wilson, 1781); also see Francis Gladwin, *The Persian Moonshie* (Calcutta: Chronicle Press, 1795), which includes a

translation of the *Qava'id-i Saltanat-i Shab Jaban*, by Chandrabhan "Brahman."

⁸See Velcheru Narayana Rao, David Shulman, and Sanjay Subrahmanyam, *Textures of Time: Writing History in South India, 1600–1800* (New York: Other Books, 2003).

⁹The following paragraphs draw heavily on Muzaffar Alam, "The Culture and Politics of Persian in Precolonial Hindustan," in *Literary Cultures in History: Reconstructions from South Asia*, ed. Sheldon Pollock (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 159–71.

¹⁰Ghulam Husain Taba'taba'i, *Siyar al-Muta'akhhirin*, vol. 1 (Lucknow: Nawalkishor Press, 1876), 200.

¹¹'Abd al-Qadir Badayuni, *Muntakhab al-Tavarikh*, vols. 1 and 3 ed. Maulavi Ahmad 'Ali, and vol. 2 ed. Munshi Ahmad 'Ali and N. Lees (Calcutta: Asiatic Society of Bengal, 1865–8), 323.

¹²Balkrishan, 'Arzdasht (London: British Library, Addn. Ms. 16859), cited in Momin Mohiuddin, *The Chancellery and Persian Epistolography under the Mughals: From Babur to Shahjahan, 1526–1658* (Calcutta: Iran Society, 1971), 41; Syed Muhammad 'Abdullah, *Adabiyat-i Farsi mein Hinduvon ka Hisab*, (Lahore: Majlis-i Taraqqi-yi Adab, 1967), 240–3.

¹³For an analysis, see Mohiuddin, *Chancellery*, 215–20.

¹⁴Muhammad 'Abdul Hamid Faruqi, *Chandra Bhan Brahman: Life and Works with a Critical Edition of his Diwan* (Ahmadabad: Khalid Shahin Faruqi, 1966); for his prose see Mohiuddin, *Chancellery*, 228–34.

¹⁵Cf. Muzaffar Alam, *The Crisis of Empire in Mughal North India: Awadh and the Punjab, 1707–1748* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1986), 169–75, 237–40.

¹⁶'Abdullah, *Adabiyat*, 121–68.

¹⁷Cited in 'Abdullah, *Adabiyat*, 241–3. Our translation.

¹⁸Even in Bengal, the administrative papers prepared and issued in the name of the local Hindu intermediaries were in Persian. Persian *insha'* even succeeded in influencing Bengali prose; cf. Promesh Acharya, "Pedagogy and Social Learning: Tol and Pathshala in Bengal," *Studies in History* 10:2 (1994): 255–72.

¹⁹Badayuni, *Muntakhab al-Tavarikh*, vol. 2, 285; also see Nicole Grandin and Marc Gaborieau, eds., *Madrassa: La transmission du savoir dans le monde musulman* (Paris: Argument, 1997).

²⁰Compare Gopal bin Govind's preface to his Persian translation of the *Ramayana*, Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Paris, Ms. Blochet, 1, 22.

²¹See M. Athar Ali, "Translation of Sanskrit Works at Akbar's Court," in *Akbar and His Age*, ed. Iqtidar Alam Khan (New Delhi: Northern Book Centre, 1999), 171–80. It would seem that in Mughal India, besides the 'aqliyah and naqliyah traditions of Islamic sciences ('ulum), we should also note the rise of a third category around the texts of so-called hikmat-i 'amali, or "practical wisdom," in which such materials were included in madrasah education.

²²Shaikh Abdur Rashid, "Some Documents on Revenue Administration during Aurangzeb's Reign," *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress*, 15th Session (Gwalior: Indian History Congress, 1952), 263–8.

²³Noman Ahmad Siddiqui, "Khulasat-us-Siyaq," *Proceedings*

of the Indian History Congress, 22nd Session (Gauhati: Indian History Congress, 1959), 282–7. This is only one of several similar texts; for another example, see Munshi Nandram Kayasth Srivastav, *Siyaqnamah* (lithograph; Lucknow: Nawalkishor Press, 1879), and for a survey of such "administrative and accountancy manuals," Irfan Habib, *The Agrarian System of Mughal India, 1556–1707*, 2nd ed. (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999), 470–1.

²⁴Bhimsen, *Nuskha-i Dilkusha*, ed. and trans. Jadunath Sarkar and V. G. Khobrekhar (Bombay: Maharashtra Department of Archives, 1971); compare Satish Chandra, *Letters of a Kingmaker of the Eighteenth Century* (Delhi: Asia Publishing House, 1972), for the letters of Mehta Balmukund.

²⁵Salar Jang Museum and Library, Hyderabad, Accession no. 4519, Mss. No. 7. All references are to this manuscript.

²⁶Cemal Kafadar, "Self and Others: The Diary of a Derwish in Seventeenth-Century Istanbul and First-Person Narratives in Ottoman Literature," *Studia Islamica* 69 (1989): 121–50.

²⁷On this Mughal *amir*, see M. Athar Ali, *The Apparatus of Empire: Awards of Ranks, Offices, and Titles to the Mughal Nobility (1574–1658)* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1985), entry S. 7374, *passim*.

²⁸On Kayasthas and Khatri in the eighteenth-century Dakhn, see Karen Isaksen Leonard, *Social History of an Indian Caste: The Kayasths of Hyderabad* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978), 23–35.

²⁹There is a vast literature on this subject, but see the useful overview in Benjamin A. Elman and Alexander Woodside, eds., *Education and Society in Late Imperial China, 1600–1900* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994).

³⁰Muzaffar Alam and Sanjay Subrahmanyam, "Discovering the Familiar: Notes on the Travel-Account of Anand Ram Mukhlis," *South Asia Research* 26:2 (1996): 131–54.